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SUBJECT: FORMER ERITREAN PRISONER TO PRODUCE MOVIE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Former Eritrean detainee, Semere Kesete, is in the process of filming a movie about the G-15, the fifteen high-ranking Eritrean party officials that stood up to the President in 2000 and have been jailed since. Semere is the former student body president of the now-defunct University of Asmara, who spent a year in prison for speaking out against the government, escaped, and is now in the United States. The project is supported by Arizona State University (ASU) and a citizen action network known as Friends of Aster. The finished product, once distributed to diaspora audiences, could be instrumental in sparking dialogue on democracy and human rights, and also help reduce financial and moral support for the Isaias regime. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The film, tentatively titled "The G-15 Mock Trials," will conduct a fictitious trial for the 11 members of the G-15 who are currently imprisoned (of the 15, one recanted, 3 fled the country, and 11 were imprisoned without trial). The stated purpose is to serve as an advocacy tool of what democracy in Eritrea would look like if the government were to implement the ratified constitution and adhere to the regional and international human rights treaties to which it is party.

¶3. (SBU) The project is led by Semere Kesete, who fled the country in 2002 after being imprisoned in solitary confinement for one year. His crime, which he shared with more than 3,000 other students, was criticizing the government for its heavy interference with university affairs. The government arrested all 3,000 students, released most after some time, but kept Semere imprisoned. Semere, with the help of a guard, escaped prison and walked six days to Ethiopia, eventually making his way to the United States.

¶4. (SBU) The project has received support thus far from the M.A. Program in Human Rights and Social Justice at ASU as well as from the Friends of Aster organization. The group's name is a reference to Aster Yohannes, the wife of G-15 detainee Petros Solomon (former Minister of Defense and former Minister of Foreign Affairs). Aster has been detained since 2003, leaving behind four children.

¶5. (C) Despite a grumbling, dissatisfied populace at home, the Isaias regime still enjoys considerable support from its diaspora communities. Some of this support is compulsory;

families living abroad are forced to pay a 2% tax on all income earned. Those that do not pay the tax are unable to obtain government records and are likely to face harassment/imprisonment upon returning to Eritrea. Another portion of the support, though, comes from the fighter generation living abroad that remember "the struggle days" and want to do anything possible to bring forth the dream of a self-reliant Eritrea. Unfortunately, this generation is often out of touch with the on-the-ground realities and regards any negative press as propaganda from a coniving international community. The same is true for a portion of the diaspora youth that believe their fair country is a victim of international conspiracy. Given the strong suspicion of international actors, the most likely route for change comes from the voices of other Eritreans, who can personally attest to the abuses of the Isaias regime.

15. (SBU) Post encourages addressees to consider supporting Semere's film. Once completed, and with the proper funding, the film could be showcased in audiences abroad and used as a starting point for critical discussions on human rights and justice in Eritrea. The project's total budget is estimated at \$35,000, the majority of which is for scriptwriting and filming. Further information can be obtained from Embassy Asmara Political Officer Ajani Husbands (HusbandsAB@state.gov).  
MCMULLEN